

Shalom House workers withdraw petition to form union

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By Emily Allen

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Shalom House employees Bob Black and Krystina O'Sullivan were part of the unionization effort. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Employees at Shalom House in Portland have withdrawn a petition to unionize.

Shalom House is a nonprofit that helps people experiencing mental health challenges and homelessness. The organization connects its clients to housing in group homes and independent apartments. They also administer housing vouchers and provide case management.

Workers sent their petition to the National Labor Relations Board in February to form a union with the Maine Service Employees Association and were on track for an April election. But an attorney for the Shalom House administration, which opposed the petition, confirmed Friday that it had been withdrawn.

If the election had moved forward, the National Labor Relations Board would have counted the votes during a videoconference on April 24.

“The employees thoughtfully considered the issues and ultimately sent a message that unionization was not the path they wanted to follow,” wrote attorney Rick Finberg. “Shalom House also appreciates the important work its employees perform for clients and the community. ... The management team looks forward to working with all employees on many important issues including issues raised during this process to create a strong future for all.”

But Shalom House staff have said publicly that their employer has spent the last month engaged in a harsh campaign to dissuade workers from unionizing.

Jay Gruber asked the Portland City Council during a meeting on March 6 to condemn “anti-union” activity by the nonprofit’s administration. Gruber described mandatory meetings, one-on-one appointments managers held to dissuade their workers from unionizing, and also anti-union emails and posters.

“For most staff, doing this work is a calling. But now we need support from our community,” said Gruber, who told councilors that workers just wanted “to secure a fair and livable wage, improve workplace safety, and improve clients’ wellbeing.”

On March 1, about 40 state lawmakers sent a letter to Shalom House, to “emphasize that employees have the legal right to organize without retaliation or intimidation.” The legislators asked Shalom House to remain neutral ahead of any vote.

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Bob Black, a per diem residential support worker, said Friday that the group ultimately withdrew the petition because upper management had created an atmosphere of “fear and confusion.” Black said higher-ups in the company called and emailed individual employees who were less outspoken about their thoughts on the union, to talk them out of voting in its favor. Workers quickly feared for their jobs.

“I can’t imagine what types of things they were saying,” said Black. “I know there were people that were very fearful of losing their jobs. I know there was fear of retaliation at work.”

Finberg rejected claims that there was an atmosphere of “fear and intimidation” and said that a “large majority of employees do not share that view.”

“Shalom House management conducted respectful communications with staff and repeatedly advised employees that the decision whether to unionize was their decision to make and that Shalom House would respect the decision they make,” Finberg said. “Management did not have any interest and remains uninterested in exchanging insults. We encouraged the employees to consider information from multiple sources so that they had all of the information they needed to be an informed voter.”

The petition covered 150 residential and clinical staff members working full-time, part-time, and per diem, including case managers, facilities and custodial staff, living skills specialists, residential support workers, vocational specialists, events coordinators, housing voucher specialists, community integration workers, relief staff and nurses.

When organizers announced the petition on Feb. 20, they said in a news release that a “strong majority” of staff supported unionizing. Employees who spoke with the Press Herald at the time said they wanted better pay and working conditions, which would ultimately improve the care that clients receive.

Black said one of his main concerns was understaffing – more people working more hours leads to unsafe working conditions, Black said.

“Having a union would allow us to put the proper pressure on management for them to hire more people,” said Black. “Because our ultimate goal, I think for all of us, the workers, is to provide the best possible care for our clients. We’re unable to do that if we’re not properly staffed and burnt out.”

Management at Shalom House told the Press Herald in February they believed a union was not in the organization’s best interest, but that they would support whatever decision employees reached.

Shalom House is funded almost entirely by the state and federal government, a budget reality that would factor into any discussion of pay.

The nonprofit is one of several social service providers in Maine where employees have formed or are trying to form a union.

Leadership at Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine voluntarily agreed to recognize their workers’ union last summer.

Preble Street workers voted to unionize in 2019, despite opposition from upper management. Last April, union members and management agreed on a new contract that increases workers’ pay by 19% over a two-year period and agreed the move would help Preble Street attract and retain more staff, creating a safer environment for employees and clients.

Timothy Stokes, a full-time residential support worker at Shalom House who supported the union efforts, said Friday that workers still plan to advocate for each other.

“We’re still organized,” Stokes said. “Even if we’re not unionized, we’re still in touch with one another. We’re still here to support one another. And I think that through the recent union effort, we’ve gotten to communicate some things with management.”

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